no. 4

No 91

An account of the Epidemic Fever as it occurred in Botetourt County Virginia during the summer of the Year eighteen hundred and twenty one

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59 Sh. 7.th

Passed March 22 1823

Spasmodic Fever

In the western part of Virginia and between the Blue Ridge and Alleghany mountains is a local situation known in familiar language by the name of Big-Lick. The inhabitants of this part of the country have been known for years past to possess a degree of health and vigour of constitution, which persons in many other sections of our country, from causes probably less congenial to health do not enjoy — Amidst however this salubrity of Climate and uninterrupted enjoyment of health, a disease, rather of a novel character, made its appearance which proved a source of considerable alarm and mortality Indeed such was the degree of violence which it speedily assumed, that those practitioners who were called upon to combat it by all those means which their knowledge of the healing art suggested, were soon made sensible of their inability to triumph over so formidable an epidemic

As regards the nature of this fever I may remark that some contrariety of opinion prevailed — By some practitioners the belief was entertained that the disease partook largely of the character of yellow fever — whilst by others the opinion was adopted of its having been only a high grade of Billious Remittent fever — An acquaintance with the symptoms as well as the causes which were supposed to have been operative in the production of the disease under consideration, may lead to a proper estimate of its true character — Of these I proceed now in detail to give some account In the first place, however it may be necessary to premise that the weather preceeding the disease was unusually warm — the mercury in the thermometer ranged for the most part between seventy and eighty five degrees of Fahrenheit. The whole country about the same time, was almost literally inundated

by immense torrents of rain — and the creeks and Rivers rose to a height rarely before witnessed — which when receded left a variety of depositions — Besides these general causes there are others which may be enumerated as having been sources equally prolific of disease — The Big-lick farm contains several swamps and marshes, which having been subjected to the combined operation of heat and moisture, which at this time prevailed ~~of~~ to excess, may be supposed to have given rise to an exhalation of noxious miasmata Again, there was a Mill-pond which was filled with stagnant Water and drawn off some time in the beginning of the summer, having vegitable and animal substances — These substances it is reasonable to suppose underwent the fermentation and putrefaction processes and thus gave rise to the production of effluvia possessing deleterious properties. To this source was imputed the primary cause

of the fever — for as singular and incredible as it may appear, this effluvia was so very offensive in its nature that it was with much difficulty that even horses could be prevailed upon to approach the pond, without manifesting the most acute sensiblenes — snorting as if conscious of impending danger — Indeed the Canine species in many instances is said to have fallen victims to these exhalations. These statements can be substantiate by many respectable persons — The most prominent symptoms of this fatal epidemic ~~were~~ were great lassitude and debility, pain in the head back and loins, small frequent pulse, sometimes intermittent, but rarely hard pain about the precordia, suffused eye, profuse perspiration, the patient sleeping with his eyes half shut, black discharges from the bowels, Vomiting of a dark brown Matter or green frothy bile, subsultus tendinum singultus, picking at the bed clothes, Coma

delirium ere death. Towards the close of the disease the secretions and excretions became extremely fœtid — generally in forty eight hours from the accession of the disease the body became tinged of a yellowish hue, which colour was first observable in the eyes next on the breast and finally over the whole surface of the body. The tongue at first somewhat dry and exhibiting a white appearance, became ultimately of a dark brown colour — the urine was sometimes high coloured, at other times however it retained its usual appearance. The secretory action of the liver was for the most part much increased, and bile was copiously excreted. In some cases the disease was ushered in by with symptoms of increased vascular action — in others however such symptoms were rather ambiguous. On this point I may remark practitioners were at issue; and consequently they treated the

disease on principles which were diametrically opposite. In conformity with the views of those physicians who supposed that the system from the first was much prostrate stimulants ~~the~~ and tonics, the most potent were exhibited — the chief of which were brandy, Wine, Volatile Alkali, Bark, Sulph. Elixir Vitriol, Camphor &c. By those who entertained different views on the subject and by whom the belief was indulged that an inflammatory diathesis ~~was~~ existed in the system during the first stage, an opposite plan of treatment was instituted, and depletory measures were ~~con~~ called into requisition and carried to some extent. In consequence of the great irritability of the stomach, medicines by the mouth, became in some degree impracticable, at least so long as this state of the stomach continued

this condition of it was generally removed in a great measure by the use of lime water and milk or by opium and the application to the region of the stomach of flannel cloths wrung out in a warm decoction of Chamomile flowers. For the same purpose was used the effervescent draught. If these measures failed a blister applied over the region of the stomach was sometimes productive of good – the patient having vomited as was deemed sufficiently purgatives were next used to evacuate the redundant bile, which continued to be preternaturally secreted – The purgative which was mostly used, was calomel given either alone or in combination with Jallap or Rhubarb – Castor oil the neutral salts, &c. were also used to preserve a soluble state of the bowels – Along with the use of these evacuants, or preceding them the lancet was occasionally used

When the disease was farther advanced blisters and sinapisms were applied to the different parts of the body, to sustain or to arouse the system which in two or three days became alarmingly prostrate. Of the utility of blisters however in this disease some were distrustful — Mercury was given in small doses with a view to its salivant effect — but the system could not be put under the full operation of ~~to~~ this medicine. Of the comparative efficacy of the different plans of treatment which were adopted, and of which I have given the outlines it is difficult or perhaps impossible to say which of the two was the more successful since neither proved but little more than mere palliatives. It may be asserted without the fear of contradiction, that this epidemic was but little understood. To this conclusion I am lead from two circumstances

The first is, that of the disease having proved fatal in almost every istance — Secondly no post mortem examinations were made by the aid of which some light may have been afforded in relation to its true chacter Most cases of this fever terminated on or after the sixth day, others however terminated on the third and fourth. More than one instance occurred in which, from an apparent Convalescence, the patient and his friends Anticipated a speedy and happy recovery; but such symptoms served only to create a sad disappointment. From the mortality and other concomitants of this formidable fever, many persons believed it to be contagious and such was the degree of terror, which resulted as the offspring of such an opinion, that the patient did not receive that degree of attention and proper nursing which has been admitted to have a considerable influence

influence in the cure of diseases – nor did he in many instances derive that solace from the cheering presence of a friend, which near the close of life, may be most desirable. There were however no grounds for the supposition that this disease was of such a character.

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